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ABSTRACT

As Langston Hughes' poem, "Theme for English B" recognizes, it is difficult for beginning writing students to develop a writing voice that is personal, yet expresses an awareness of context and community. Each writer/student potentially has three voices: (1) the voice students are born to, which reflects socio-economic and cultural background, ethnicity, race, and gender; (2) the voice students find thrust upon them as they become members of specific discourse communities; and (3) the voice students achieve through the process of education and academic practice. A writing teacher can help students through the developmental stages necessary to acquire a personal writing voice by calling attention to the link between voice and identity and by exploring the difference between public and private identities and voices. Examining the distorting, developing, squelching, humiliating, and exhilarating process of being educated that students are currently undergoing enables students to talk about the struggle to mediate between what they were born with or into and what they had thrust upon them. Talking to themselves and to their past selves, to each other, and to the instructor encourages students to see the development of a personal voice as a process, not an end. Instructors need to remind students that their voices, like their identities, are fluid, complex, and multiple. (SAM)

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"Go home and write/ a page tonight. /And let that page come out of you--/ Then, it will be true.'/ I wonder if it's that simple?/..../It's not easy to know what is true for you or me/... But I guess I'm what/I feel and see and hear..../...../So will my page be colored that I write?/ Being me it will not be white/ But it will be/ a part of you, instructor...."

So says the student in Langston Hughes's poem, "Theme for English B." And he is right. It is not easy to know what is true or how to write it. It is not easy to know what it means to write a page that "comes out of you" and sounds like you. And he is right, moreover, to recognize the many voices that will converge, perhaps challenging, perhaps teasing, perhaps reinforcing each other, on that one page the student finally submits, saying, "well, here I am." The student in the poem acknowledges the resonances or echoes of all his years in the south, all the Harlem streets he's trod, all the classrooms he's sat in as an insider and an outsider, all the instructors he's listened to, including this one who asks for a page that is true --the voices of all these places and people are there. All "talk on [his] page."

What this student recognizes is the complexity and multiplicity of voice. It is a recognition that many of our students have not yet achieved. When we tell them that a strong personal voice is

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an essential component of good writing, they ask whether it is is born or bred? Begged, borrowed, or stolen? Is a writing voice, to paraphrase Shakespeare, "born, achieved, or thrust upon one"? How should we answer them?

Many of our first-year students enter our classrooms with a "this is how I write, this is just the way I am," attitude toward their voices on paper. Some utter this in a fiercely proud manner, while others mutter it with resignation or even a touch of despair. They are convinced that their voices, like their looks, are a given--immutable, unchangeable. A voice, in short, is "born." And it is. When this voice really emerges, it reflects significant aspects of a student's identity: her socio-economic and cultural background, ethnicity, race, age, gender, all that the student has experienced thus far. We hear this voice in the raw, bold, brave accounts of students' lives we are presented with each semester.

But more often than not, the voice that students consider their "real voice," the voice that emerges when first they put pen to paper or fingers to keyboard is the least individualistic of their voices, is the voice that least reflects who they are. We hear instead the generic, homogenized voice of cliches, of advertising, of popular culture. It is a voice without color or tone. Thus the voice that is "born" needs something else to jolt it into life and resonance, so that it can reflect the individual student in all her glorious tones and colors. Unattended to, it is often interchangeable with the next student's voice. Anyone,

male or female, black or white, from any region, could have written this passage submitted to me on the first day of class: "The inside of our house is great. I sit and notice many things, things that are very special to me....The greatest thing of all is my sister's room. The room is so fun and exciting." We need to help the student probe and prod such a voice, allowing it to answer as authentically as possible the question: "WHERE HAVE I BEEN?"

A second identifiable voice is the one that emerges when students self-consciously acknowledge their membership in a new discourse community; they are now part of the academy, or they are struggling to be. They acquire a particular awareness of audience, writing now for a new audience and serving as the audience to the voices they read --the authors and texts assigned-- and the voices they hear --those of their peers and their instructors.

Ideally, this second voice simply reflects a mature attentiveness to context and community. But, once again, left to its own devices, this voice can conceal rather than reveal the student. Even more familiar to us perhaps than the "this is just the way I write (just the way I am)" line is the question "Is this what you want? Is this what I am supposed to write?(supposed to be)?" Uncertain in their new position, eager to please, many students seem to lose their voices entirely as they parrot or mimic the sounds of the academy. They emulate a kind of stylistic "negative capability" so that they can assume, like skilled

ventriloquists, the voice that marks them as members of the academic community. They feel, in short, to continue with our Shakespeare, that a voice is "thrust upon them." We lose the individual student for the second time in lines like the following: "Although, through reading essays from different eras clearly indicate social progression, the common tribulations of humanity stay unchanged..... Albeit, writing is a skill yet to master, knowing its weight thereafter."

But we need the gesture or consciousness this voice implies, a gesture toward audience, just as we need the voice that is born; at its best and clearest, this "thrust upon one" voice directly and intelligently addresses the question "WHERE AM I NOW?"

The third identifiable voice is the one that embraces the first two; it emerges from them though not, I hasten to say, in a developmental sense. All composition teachers and theorists recognize different kinds of voices, but many conceive of the development of voice as a sequential process; they isolate separate stages and steps. My emphasis is on simultaneity. The third voice is, in fact, the one we hear when the first two are fully activated. We love to hear this voice, a voice that stretches the student in all ways, that engages her in a struggle with herself, with her peers, with her instructors, with the texts she reads. This is, Shakespeare once more, the "achieved voice." When we encourage students to explore the questions, " WHERE HAVE I BEEN?" and WHERE AM I NOW," we are, in fact, inviting them to confront a more critical question, WHERE AM I

GOING? This is the question the student confronts in Langston Hughes's poem when he has his southern childhood, the Harlem streets he's trod, the classrooms he has sat in, and the instructor he addresses now all talk to each other on the page, pointing him toward a new definition of himself.

How do we initiate that talk? How do we develop this triad, a term which, I discovered to my glee, the dictionary defines as "a chord with three tones"? It is our task as teachers of writing to enable it, to make a place where the rich conversation of a textured or layered voice can occur. How can we accomplish this task?

First we should overtly call our students' attention to the link between voice and identity. When we ask them to explore where they have been/ where they are/ where they are going, we are confronting them with the question of who they are, a question appropriate to a composition class. Ann Berthoff reminds us that "at the heart of all composing [is] a writer in dialogue with his various selves and with his audience.... The composition classroom," she argues "ought to be a place where the various selves are heard and an audience's response is heard."

We reinforce the link between who they are and their voices on paper through carefully chosen texts and topics. Without stopping here to defend the critical need of readings in first-year writing courses (that's another paper, another story), I will simply assert that readings are indispensable.

Identity evolves through hitting against and responding to others' words. "Reading," David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky tell students in the introduction to their anthology Ways of Reading,

> can be the occasion for you to put things together, to notice this idea or theme rather than that one, to follow a writer's announced or secret ends while sumultaneously following your own. When that happens, when you forge a reading of a story or an essay, you make your mark on it, casting it in your own terms.... The text provides the opportunity for you to see through someone else's powerful language, to imagine your own familiar settings through the images, metaphors, and ideas of others.

And there are so many fine readings to choose from. The richness and variety of the reader/writer anthologies that cross our desks are remarkable. Instead, however, of naming particular texts (though I will name essays), I am going to suggest subject matter which I have found especially useful in helping students to explore the relationship between identity and voice, between who they are and how they sound. And useful as well in helping students find a place for themselves in the academic community. One topic that I have found consistently effective is the relationship between public and private identity, particularly between public and private language. Such a topic directly confronts issues of voice and identity and students respond enthusiastically. Authors such as Paule Marshall, Amy Tan, Richard Rodriguez, and Maxine Hong Kingston write for a public audience about the contrast between the sounds of home and the sounds heard in the world beyond home. Such material urges students to openly engage with such issues in their own lives. They learn a few things from their encounter with such texts.

First they learn --although they have recognized this

intuitively-- that there is a difference between public and private identities and voices. Second, they learn that the difference can be publicly acknowledged. Finally, they learn that although the two realms are different, home culture and home selves have a place in the public domain.

Indeed, Richard Rodriguez, even while lamenting the loss of his first voice, his home voice, reclaims that very voice in his beautiful, lyric prose, haunting in its echoes of his lost Spanish; he has made of his private identity or the supposed loss thereof, a public enterprise. Rodriguez calls attention to the distance between "where he has been" and "where he is" in a voice which suggests "where he is going," integrating, as it does, all three strands. He immortalizes the self and the voice he claims he lost in a passage such as the following from his much-anthologized "Aria":

> a word like "si" sounded in several notes, would convey added measures of feeling. Tongues lingered around the edges of words, especially fat vowels, and we happily sounded that military drum roll, the twirling roar of the Spanish "r." Family language, my family's sounds: the voices of my parents and sisters and brother. Their voices insisting: "You belong here, we are family members. Related. Special to one another. Listen!" Voices singing and sighing, rising and straining, then surging, teeming with pleasure which burst syllables into fragments of laughter.

Reading Rodriguez students learn that the differences and distances between the two worlds, where they have been and where they are, can coexist in rich, creative tension, pointing them in a new direction; the private world cannot ignore the public forum and the public cannot smother or drown out the private.

Authors like Rodriguez make the relationship between public and

private voices a subject for scrutiny. Commenting on an assignment that emerged out of reading Rodriguez and Paule Marshall, a student said to me as she submitted her essay, "I didn't know we could write about things like that, about, you know, things about who you are. I didn't know it mattered."

I introduce my students to authors like Sandra Cisneros who writes, she says, "with two voices." Cisneros does so literally, infusing Spanish words and phrases into the rythmic speech of her Mexican-American characters. In an interview, Cisneros notes, commenting on the bridge between mainstream Americans and Mexican-Americans, "I've always been that bridge because I can speak those two languages: the language of working-class Latinos and the language of those people in power." Cisneros delights in sounding her two voices, confiding that "I could live three-hundred years and if I lived that long, I still wouldn't run out of things to say. It's not just the novelty, it's the new way of putting language together which is always new."

With a clearer sense of her right to more than one voice, a student follows Cisneros's lead and boldly sings in two voices: "My cousin, brother, and I would run into the kitchen and poke around the pots, pans, and bowls. After two seconds my tia Yolanda or tia Chaya would holler at us, 'Bayanse de aqui! get out of here!' and we would scatter like a swarm of flies trying to avoid the sting of the fly swatter.... My tio Arturo adds, 'behave yourselves o si no, el senor Santo Claus won't bring you any gifts!'"

And writer Amy Tan in her essay "Mother Tongue" speaks eloquently and intimately --though again in a public forum-- of her love of language and "all the Englishes" she grew up with and uses in her work. She lovingly duplicates her mother's tongue noting that "her language...is vivid, direct, full of observation and imagery. That was the language that helped shape the way I saw things, expressed things, made sense of the world." When Tan is with her mother, she comfortably uses her "first language": "Not waste money that way," she says to her mother as they shop, using her "born" voice, her "where I have been" voice. Yet in a public forum, Tan comfortably uses a very different English. Phrases like "The intersection of memory upon imagination" and "there is an aspect of my fiction that relates to" come easily to her tongue.

But the English which won her public acclaim and won her a committed audience was an English which integrates all her different Englishes, weaving together "where she has been, where she is, and where she is going"; it is an achieved voice. "I began," she tells us, "to write stories using all the Englishes I grew up with."

Many of our students do not, of course, have "second languages." technically speaking. Yet they all have -- we all have-- many voices, many Englishes. Composition theorists echo the writers I've discussed above. Donald Murray says "My voice is the product of Scottish genes and a Yankee environment, of Baptist sermons and the newspaper city room, of all the languages I have

heard and spoken." And I confide to my students that my own voice is the product of a working-class, Irish-American father who, in Joycean fashion, blended Latinate phrasing and Shakespearean quotes; of a silent mother with an uppity family; of all the good and bad schools I attended; of all the authors I've read and adored and emulated; of all the conferences I've participated in; of all the classrooms I've presided over, listening to my students' voices. Our task is to help students recognize and use all their own different languages.

Another topic along with public/private identity that invites or promotes the development of a rich voice is education. Over a period of two or three weeks, we examine the transforming, distorting, developing, squelching, humiliating, and exhilarating process of being educated, a process students are currently undergoing. What better topic for scrutiny in a classroom?

We approach this topic from a number of different directions ensuring the students' complex engagement with it. In my handout (which, let me mention here, includes a short list of key essays on voice), I outline my approach to education, one that reflects my general pedagogic strategies. Briefly, I assign a series of pre-reading questions about education which the students answer in writing. Then we read and respond to a group of texts; my choices vary some each semester but they might include Mike Rose, Norman Podhoretz, Richard Rodriguez (again!), Malcolm X. Students eventually write an essay which integrates all the stages and aspects of the assignment, an essay which locates them

in the dialogue about the education process using their "full" voice, one which reflects where they have been, where they are, and where they are going.

When I teach this unit, I find that many students are startled, dismayed even, by the idea that they might be changed through formal education. They see the self as a stable unit, developed, fixed in stone, even though, when first asked about the consequences of education, they have spouted phrases like "growing as a person" and "maturing a lot" and "expanding one's horizons." They think that identity, like a voice, is just "born." But once introduced to the idea of self-transformation, they are fascinated. They see how radically changed people like Mike Rose, and Norman Podhoretz, and Richard Rodriguez have been through the education process. Such changes can as easily wrench our hearts as cheer us, but that a change will take place should not be denied. All of these writers talk about the struggle to mediate between what they were born with or into and what they had thrust upon them. All of them confront what they have achieved in attempting to mediate the two. The achieved self, these authors and, we hope, our students acknowledge, is a process rather than an end. And the process is reflected in a voice still vibrating under the pressure of change and growth.

In form, content, and pedagogic approach, units like this one encourage the development of a full, layered voice. Students are talking to themselves and their past selves, to each other, to me the instructor, "she who knows," to the authors/texts they read. They then confront themselves again as they explore where

they are going by assessing the distance between where they have been and where they are. All of their voices "talk on the page."

The quote which gives my paper its title comes from Twelfth Night and is spoken by "the much-abused Malvolio." When he struggles to define "greatness," rather than voice, he rejects the idea that it is born or achieved, choosing instead to see it as "thrust upon one." Consequently, he makes a fool of himself; he appears at the end of the play cross-gartered and yellow-stockinged, parading in the ill-fitting garb thrust upon him by another. We do not want our students to appear thus at the end of their time with us. We do not want them to give attention to one voice at the expense of the others. We must wean them away from a voice that only says where it has been or where it is. We want them instead to realize that greatness and voice are born, and achieved, and thrust upon one.

The three voices work together, but all three change continually. One voice does not follow another in succession, replacing, supplanting, or usurping the previous one. They are rather as a triad is, three tones in one, each dependent on the others to be sounded. The richness in tone grows as we do. Where we have been changes each year, as does where we are, as does, inevitably, as a consequence of the first two, where we are going. So the nature of the "talk" these voices engage in together on the page will shift and deepen. We need to remind students that their voices, like their identities, are fluid, are always, as Wordsworth puts it, "ever more about to be."

Sometimes one voice will speak loudest, drowning out, for a time, the others, depending on where we are and to whom we are speaking. But the most resonant writing reflects the response to all these questions: where have I been, where am I now, and where am I going. And all three are embraced by the single most important question both inside and outside the academy: "who am I?" The answer from our point of view as writing instructors should be "someone whose voices we are eager to hear; someone whose voices are worth hearing." Listen! "Voices singing and sighing, rising and straining, then surging, teeming with pleasure." Listen!